

COMMUNITY COLLEGES: BRIDGING ACCESS TO SUCCESS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE BRANDING

Dynamic social forces are changing the way community colleges must operate, communicate and interact with their publics in order to gain support.



Case Studies of the Connecticut Community Colleges System



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“Community colleges are sitting more and more on the line between secondary and postsecondary education.”

- Clifford Adelman,
Senior Research Analyst,
U.S. Department
of Education

“It took every ounce of energy I had to summon up the courage to just walk through the doors of Capital Community College in Hartford. That simple act turned my life around. Suddenly, I was provided with not only the resources to continue my education, but also the encouragement that I was capable of doing it”

- Former community college student, now associate professor of psychology at Capital Community College

The Challenge

Being close to home and affordable are no longer powerful enough motivators to secure the constant stream of students necessary to sustain a healthy community college. Image matters... to parents, prospective students, donors, high school guidance counselors, surrounding community and business leaders. Today's community college cannot afford to underestimate the value and importance of a strong institutional image. In fact, a college is at risk of putting their institution in financial jeopardy if they do not create a brand and an image around the community college.

Branding and positioning create an image over time, which promotes value to an intended audience. This position paper addresses the image, branding and positioning strategies community colleges must address in order to keep enrollment up, increase donor contributions and rally support from local community leaders and businesses.

How to Brand Your Community College

Every brand has a personality made up of core attributes that define the institution it represents. For example, Volvo's brand is "safety" while Nike is "Just do it." Developing an institution's brand identity starts with deciding who it is and what it stands for. But whose reality is a college centered on? Internal audience or external customer? It is important for community colleges to start with understanding their target audiences' needs in relation to understanding their own offerings and services.

Community colleges must get buy-in across the board during this self-analysis process to build support for brand implementation and minimize internal resistance. The key to getting decision makers and implementers on the same page is separating "fact" from "perception." This calls for internal and external research, consensus building and collaboration. Branding "musts" include:

- Leadership and team building
- Right mix of strategies and tactics

- Getting everyone on-board and on-message
- Commodity versus value line differentiation
- Getting the leadership and management to buy into a new way of positioning their institution
- Measuring and evaluating outcomes

Key elements of an effective brand image are:

1. It's easy to remember and recognize.
2. It evokes positive feelings about your product or service.
3. It reassures the customer that they made an intelligent choice.

How to Successfully Position A Community College

When positioning and branding a community college, creating and sustaining an image is paramount for success. Developing and presenting an organization's brand and position is a disciplined effort based on thorough research and analysis of distinguishing characteristics and unifying attributes. The three primary components of positioning are:

1. Benefit: emotional and realistic reason to choose a college or program
2. Target: identify the best potential "customer" (student/donor/supporter)
3. Competition: identify who is vying for that "customer" (student/donor/supporter)

To avoid mistakes already made by others, it is good to keep in mind three most common reasons why image positioning and branding initiatives fail:

1. Lack of commitment to the customer
2. Lack of clear benefit to the customer
3. Lack of position in the marketplace

To keep a branding campaign from being a "flash in the pan," it is necessary to sustain it by backing up a brand. The old adage "put your money where your mouth is" fits here. A short term effort will not solve long term problems. Sustainability is the key.

Branding + Positioning + Performance = Organizational Identity

Successful branding is sustained with successful integrated marketing communications (IMC). Here, each public relations and marketing element of the IMC campaign reflects the brand's value proposition and supports the other elements of the campaign. Targeting a message to an identified audience maximizes marketing resources, saves money and is more effective than a "shotgun" mass marketing approach.

Case Studies: Connecticut Community College System

The Situation

Market research, begun in 1997, revealed an overall lack of public awareness about college offerings and services and negative public perceptions associated with non-competitive, open door admission institutions. To address these findings, the Connecticut Community College System (CCC), working with First Experience Communications (FEC) as marketing counsel, sought to identify and publicize shared strengths that would leverage the advantages of community colleges collaborating to increase enrollment, resources, and enhance the image of both the system and the 12 colleges.

Discovery and Planning

FEC conducted extensive primary and secondary research to gauge public awareness of, perceptions about and expectations for the CCCs. A sustainable integrated marketing, advertising and PR campaign that incorporated the 12 college marketing programs, eliminated duplication and improved audience perception of the CCC system and individual colleges was then implemented. Using seed money from system funding, an identity package and graphic standard were established to express the unique brand of higher education that provides access to success for thousands of students each year at their level of need. The entire system was branded and positioned to increase enrollment of the targeted audiences to meet a 10% increase goal over five years.

Implementation

Based on the primary and secondary research conducted, the "Technical" originally in the organization's name was removed because it added to the misconceptions that the CCC system provided only traditional, technical, blue collar industry education and was too closely associated with the area's vocational-technical high school training programs. The resulting system of 12 "Connecticut Community Colleges" was then branded and positioned to attract the attention and referral of outstanding business and community leaders, including state and local government, as well as increase enrollment of the targeted audiences.

A 2000-2005 Marketing and Communications Plan was developed as a result of the research-defined needs. Elements of the plan included use of public relations; the newly developed logo and tagline with corresponding graphic standards manual tied to print purchasing standards; print, radio and cable advertising; direct mail campaigns; trade shows and recruitment events at high schools, businesses and community organizations; improved system and college-specific web site navigation, standardized nomenclature and e-mail addresses; pilot programs at individual colleges; and reallocation of funding to key areas of recruitment and retention, information technology, communications, staff development/training and IMC execution.

Key messages were crafted for each of the target audiences using information from the research to highlight the CCC competitive advantages in offering higher education opportunities in a wide range of programs and services for a diverse audience of students with practical, "real world" expectations.

Collateral materials illustrate the unique nature of a community college as well as the "surprises" that will counter negative perceptions and establish a community college image that differentiates its "brand" of education as uniquely suited to serving the interests of their students. This is achieved by: connecting community colleges to high profile success stories (faculty success stories and advertising campaign); "surprising"

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- David Cannon,
Board of Trustees,
Connecticut
Community Colleges

their audiences to dispel commonly held misconceptions; combining attention-getting advertising with an educational component that cuts through the clutter of competing higher education advertising; and explaining why the CCCs are different and how this difference is an advantage for students.

These messages are related to improving CCC's image through relationship marketing and communications – a long-term (lifelong learning) approach to communicating the community college brand and to building “brand” loyalty to leverage the CCC's competitive advantages.

Results

From inception to ongoing implementation in 2005, results include: immediate improvement of: data collection and analysis, advertising effectiveness, management of the CCC messages and images; maximized use of limited resources (both human and financial) in marketing efforts; and positive impact on policy, government and business leaders.

Highlights of the sustained image and marketing campaign –

- Expansion of CT Aid to Public College Students Program (CAPCS Program) by 2000 General Assembly
- Special funding of Community College initiative to provide access to At Risk Students
- Tuition freeze with special funding by the General Assembly to cover ongoing cost increase.
- Implementation of a State Matching Endowment Fund Program to encourage fund raising at public colleges. To date, the community colleges have raised \$6.3 million making them eligible for \$3 million in matching funds.
- Additional transfer opportunities for students through a guaranteed admissions program with the University of Connecticut and curriculum pathways with the State University System.
- Three years of record FTE enrollments
- 28.3 % increase in FTE 1999-2004

- 14% increase in headcount enrollment 1999-2004
- 52% increase in full-time attendance since 1999
- 31% minority enrollments in Fall 2004
- Recognition as a “foundation of economic development” by the Governor's Council on Economic Competitiveness

Capital Community College, Hartford, Connecticut

Project: Grassroots, direct marketing campaign to boost Latino enrollment

Capital Community College, located in the inner city of Hartford, Connecticut, needed to increase its Latino student population to 25% of the school's overall total enrollment to qualify for a \$3 million Federal grant.

First Experience Communications proactively formed alliances with more than 50 local influential Latino leaders, organizations and media to generate support and commitment within their Latino community for this golden opportunity. An interview team went to the campus to talk with identified Latino students and capture their success stories and comments to include in promotional material. FEC's creative team developed a brochure in both Spanish and English that focused on the opportunities community colleges offered, available financial aid and highlighted student success stories. A letter from the college president was written to directly ask for support from the Latino “influencers” who had been contacted to determine the quantity of brochures they would need for distribution. Brochures were personally delivered with the president's letter to members of over 50 different local Latino organizations. This grassroots approach helped the college form relationships with the leaders in the Hispanic community for long-term benefits, increase its Latino student population to 25% of the school's overall total enrollment and qualify for the \$3 million grant.

Tunxis Community College, Farmington, Connecticut

Tunxis Community College hosted the pilot program for the Connecticut Community College system's Integrated Marketing Communications plan. They were the first of Connecticut's 12 community colleges to leverage the IMC strategies at the local level of implementation.

Tunxis supported adopting a thematic approach to its marketing for several reasons:

1. Its bifurcated image had left people confused about who Tunxis was, both locally and as part of a community college system
2. Sharing a common identity across the state would reduce their overall cost of marketing
3. The plan addressed their need to more clearly communicate with multiple audiences
4. IMC offered greater ease of research and tracking results
5. Distinctive professional logo and graphic standards offered a major improvement over their previous identifying mark.

"When the Connecticut Community Colleges decided to brand," reflected Leigh Knopf, APR, Tunxis Community College's director of marketing and public relations, "First Experience Communications helped us clarify our messages, reduce clutter, and strategize based on research that also helped us differentiate our values in the marketplace." The college adopted an integrated marketing approach and adapted system projects, including: research, graphics and messaging, development of advertising and collateral materials, ad placement and targeted direct mail campaigns.

In the pilot phase, Tunxis realized a 4.75% increase in credit enrollment – nearly 25% MORE than the system's average increase. After five years of implementation, they had boosted overall credit enrollment by more than 14% and were able to reduce their marketing budget by 16.8% of their 2000 budget, after adjusting for

inflation. "With First Experience Communications' help," said Knopf, "we have been leading the way in marketing improvements and long-term planning, which makes more effective and cogent use of limited resources."

Northwestern Connecticut Community College, Winsted, Connecticut

With enrollment at a five-year low, Northwestern Connecticut Community College determined it needed to boost its recruitment campaign. First Experience Communications worked with the college to create a direct mail campaign targeting the group that research had identified as most likely to enroll: men and women ages 18 – 40 with a high school diploma. A series of nine academic program-specific postcards were developed and directly mailed to targeted households in the college's 20-town service area.

Immediately following the first half of the campaign, Northwestern Connecticut realized a 5.5% increase in its Spring 2005 FTE enrollments over Spring 2004. Strategically spaced mailings are continuing throughout the year to boost enrollment in subsequent semesters. Dr. Barbara Douglass, president of Northwestern Connecticut Community College said the array of academic program postcards "are now a vital part of our targeted marketing for individual program outreach. These postcards have helped to reinforce our college's brand and highlighted the strength of our academic and career programs. They have also enhanced our enrollment management efforts and contributed to the recent increase in enrollment."

Conclusion

Community colleges must reach out to clearly, simply and accurately communicate with their stakeholder audiences. Branding a positive image, building value, backing your brand with ongoing communications and a quality educational experience will put you well on the way to fostering long-term relationships.

Every community college stands to serve as a beacon of hope to people. Yet, you will be constantly challenged to change, reinvent and take a different approach in building value for your constituents. It is an exciting time and a challenging one.

Any positive trend is the result of many factors – the growth of enrollment and the growing support for community colleges have resulted from the hard work and dedication of many people, from the presidents to the faculty and staff who have focused on making student success possible in classrooms, laboratories, and libraries across the system. Making their work and the success of students visible through a sustained image program has helped create a community college message that is clear, unified, and persuasive; and it has measurably changed the public's and government leadership's perception of community colleges.

About First Experience Communications (FEC) and Ira W. Yellen, APR, President & CEO

A believer in lifelong learning, Ira Yellen carved a unique marketing niche in the education arena by creating communication models for public school districts and community colleges in Connecticut. While working with Margaret Mead in the early 1970s, he explored the relationships that intertwine commerce, civic institutions, society and human nature – a perspective that continues to influence his work and his agency today.

First Experience Communications serves three core market segments: education, business-to-business and non-profits. FEC has been helping school districts strengthen relationships within their communities for more than twenty years. FEC provides high-level counsel in public relations and communication to college presidents, school superintendents, educational leaders and boards of education members. From early childhood programs to higher education, FEC has immersed itself in a holistic approach to identifying educational issues and meeting challenges. The company's services help educators and administrators connect and form bonds with all their various audiences, including parents, board members, civic leaders, anti-tax groups, students, donors, the media and the community at large. The common element for success is the same in each case – strategic communications planning. Here are some of the tools and services FEC uses to help clients build value, improve communications and win community support.

Marketing

- Websites
- eNewsletters
- Community-based surveying and research
- Direct marketing

Communication

- Strategic counsel
- Audits
- Crisis
- Workshops and training

Public Relations

- Media relations and coaching
- Editorial services
- Press kits

If you have questions about this paper or want to discuss community college issue related to public education, feel free to contact us:

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